DoD News Briefing with Col. Lewis Craparotta from Iraq, June 30, 2008

(Note: Colonel Craparotta appears via videoconference from Iraq.)

BRYAN WHITMAN (deputy assistant secretary of Defense, Public Affairs): Well, thank you for joining us this morning -- this evening, your time.

For those of you who are not familiar with him, our briefer today is Marine Colonel Lewis Craparotta, who is the commander of the Regimental Combat Team 1. His unit began operations as a part of Multinational Forces West in January. And as some of you will recall, this is his second time briefing us.

He is at Camp Fallujah today and will start us off with giving us a brief operational update and then take some of your questions.

So, Colonel, thanks again for joining us today. And let me turn it over to you.

COL. CRAPAROTTA: Okay. Thank you, Bryan, and good morning. I just have a brief statement to talk about the success here in Anbar in the performance of the Marines, soldiers and the sailors and the missions that they're accomplishing.

I think you're aware that RCT-1 operates from the western boundaries of Baghdad to the far western edges of Ramadi. This is eastern Al Anbar and what we refer to as AO East. It includes the two cities, two major cities of Fallujah and Ramadi.

Our number one priority remains protection of the population, so I'll start by talking about security very quickly. As I did previously, I characterized the enemy in our area as being neutralized.

As you're aware, we still see violence in the area. And we're very conscious that the enemy would like to come back to Fallujah and Ramadi. Both cities have historical significance to the insurgents.

We've had several -- seen several attempts over the past two months at spectacular attacks. And as you know, we suffered one such attack last week in Karmah.

We watch the enemy actions very closely. We work side-by-side with both the Iraqi police and the Iraqi army to reduce the enemy's capabilities to execute these attacks, and to prevent them from reestablishing themselves in our area.

In the urban areas, we spent the better part of the last several months partnered with the Iraqi police, training and operating together, improving security.

We're now in a position, where we provide support to the police, and they have the lead for security in the cities. And the relationships that we have developed with the Iraqi

police have allowed us to reduce slowly our 24-hour presence, put them in the lead for most of the day-to-day operations.

And while the additional responsibility has shifted to the police, the most important element is the relationships that we've fostered. And these relationships will be the key to our continued success here in the province.

I would tell you that there is mutual respect among the forces and a common goal: protecting the citizens. And both the Iraqi army and the Iraqi police leadership has certainly proven capable. They have risen to every occasion and they have certainly earned the respect of the population.

We have one brigade from the Iraqi army that remains in the AO East. They operate for the most part outside the urban centers. We've got military transition teams that live with these forces and work with these forces. Whenever possible, we use coalition forces or combat forces to conduct combined operations.

The progress that we've made in security has also enabled us to spend more time working alongside our State Department colleagues. We've assisted or are assisting the Iraqis with local governance, reconstruction, implementing the rule of law and generally trying to improve the quality of life for the citizens.

Local governments are continuing to prosper, with mayors and city councils taking on more and more responsibility. And we expect that that will accelerate here, as we transition to provincial Iraqi control.

The links, between the city and the district and the provincial governments, are established and are being taken advantage of by the Iraqis at every opportunity.

And these local civic leaders, like their police and army counterparts, understand their responsibility to the citizens and they're working very hard to represent the people.

In the economic arena, we're working to restore small businesses. We're coordinating both major and minor reconstruction efforts. We're working side by side with the Iraqis to restore essential services with electrical generation projects, water and sewer projects -- still working. In coordination with the State Department, we are making a significant investment in agriculture and trying to restore some of the irrigation systems to help put the farmers back in the fields.

And overall, we're seeing a great deal of progress being made. And quite frankly, we're looking forward to the transfer to provincial Iraqi control. I think we all believe that we can sustain the progress that we've made here in the province.

So with that, I'll go ahead and stop here and take your questions.

MR. WHITMAN: Well, thank you again for that overview, and we do have a few questions here.

Courtney, we'll start with you today.

Q Hi, Colonel, this is Courtney Kube from NBC News.

You painted a very optimistic picture of eastern Anbar. And you spoke a little bit about the transfer to provincial control in Anbar, which we all expect to happen in the next few days. I guess the million dollar question is, if things are going so well on the security front, if the Iraqis are taking the lead, at what point do you think the Marines will be able to draw down their numbers in -- specifically in eastern Anbar, but then in the entire province?

- COL. CRAPAROTTA: Well, Courtney, I think the answer to that question lies a couple levels above my command authority. I think the current position is that once we transition the PIC, once we -- the surge is over in other areas in the country, then we'll do the 45-day assessment and make a determination. So I can't really speak to any further drawdown in the province.
- Q Do you have any sense of when that PIC may happen, since it was delayed for storms?
- COL. CRAPAROTTA: I think, Courtney, as soon as the weather clears, you'll see us try and execute PIC very quickly. We've had some sandstorms. If you go outside right now, you can see about 400 yards. And I think as soon as the dust settles, so to speak, we will see the PIC be executed very quickly.

MR. WHITMAN: Jeff, go ahead.

- Q Colonel, Jeff Schogol, Stars and Stripes. Regarding the incident at Karmah, I saw a media report that the suicide bomber was dressed as an Iraqi police officer. Can you confirm this and talk about how this person was able to penetrate the meeting?
- COL. CRAPAROTTA: Yes. The suicide bomber in Karmah, we believe, was dressed in a camouflage uniform similar to what is worn by some of the security forces here in the province. We are not exactly sure how he was able to get into the meeting. We've got army, police and, of course, coalition forces doing a joint investigation. We have detained several people in regards to this incident and we're doing some further investigating to see if we can identify the cells and the networks that this bomber was associated with.
 - Q And who is in charge, now, of 2nd Battalion, 3rd Marines?
- COL. CRAPAROTTA: Lieutenant Colonel Pat Cashman (sp) is now the commander of 2nd Battalion, 3rd Marines.

MR. WHITMAN: Go ahead -- (name inaudible).

- Q Colonel, going back to the transfer of power ceremony, there are some reports -even though there are the sandstorms there, there are some reports that there was some
 conflict between having that ceremony about the same time as the burial of a procoalition sheikh. Is that anything that's on the right target or, you know, what -- was there
 anything in particular that happened besides the sandstorm that may have delayed the
 ceremony?
- COL. CRAPAROTTA: No, I think the key aspect of postponing the PIC ceremony was the weather. I think the plan was to evaluate the weather well before the attack in Karmah. And the weather was the only factor that I know of that was relative to postponing the PIC ceremony.

MR. WHITMAN: Jim.

Q Colonel, this is Jim Garamone, from American Forces Press Service.

Could you discuss in more detail the links between the federal government and the provincial government?

COL. CRAPAROTTA: In reality, I'm not in a very good position to address the links between the province and the government of Iraq itself. I work mostly with the city leadership and the municipal leadership in the smaller cities like Sakalaweyah, Amiriyah, Ferris, and of course, Fallujah, Ramadi. And we tie into the provincial council and the governor. But the links with Baghdad are not really within my realm of responsibility.

I can give you my personal opinion, and that would be that we need some additional support from the government of Iraq. And I think we are all expecting that when we transition to PIC that the governor -- government of Iraq will increase the level of support to the province so that they can really take advantage of that element of control that they'll gain after the ceremony.

- Q Are there funds that the cities don't have that they need from the federal government?
- COL. CRAPAROTTA: Can you say that again? I didn't -- I did not catch what you were asking for.
- Q Are there funds -- has the federal government provided the funds needed to the city?
- COL. CRAPAROTTA: There is a budget -- provincial budget that is being executed. As with most budgets, I think there is always a desire for more. But this is, I think, the first year that we've been able to execute a budget. Right now, we're going through the process of submitting a budget for '09. So I think in that regard, we're picking up steam in

the budget area and governance. And I think we're on the road to success, if that answers your question.

MR. WHITMAN: We'll go back to Courtney.

- Q Hi Colonel, it's Courtney from NBC News again. Just to clarify, so the support that the area is looking for from the government of Iraq, is that all monetary or is there another -- any other kind of support that's still lacking? And is that the number one thing that you're hearing from the sheikhs when you go out and meet with them, or what are their main concerns? Are they concerned that the U.S. is going to draw down and the violence will return? Could you talk a little bit about those meetings that you have with them?
- COL. CRAPAROTTA: Yes, Courtney. I think they're concerned about funds and the availability of funds down to the local governments. And we're still working through the whole process of how the money actually gets from the provincial government down to the local governments. But we're working that very hard and I think we're on- track in that area.

The other element of support that we need comes from the ministries. And I will tell you that we need support from the Ministry of Interior, for example, when it comes to our police force. We're short vehicles; we're short other resources. So again, some of the support from the ministries directly to the province have been lacking. And we expect that that support should pick up as we transition to provincial control and we tie that link between the provincial government and the national government.

- Q Has this lack of resources caused any kind of operational problem? I mean, has the Iraqis -- have they not been able to complete a mission or have they had to borrow things from the United States?
- COL. CRAPAROTTA: Well, we've been providing them training and support all along. That's part of our mission. But we're at a point now where if we can get this additional support from the central government, that in my view the -- certainly the policemen that I work with, we would see a -- we could see a dramatic increase in their effectiveness with some additional support.
- Q Colonel, it's Mike Mount again from CNN. Keeping on the theme with this support, is this -- what's the cause of the delay? Is this the continued friction between -- you know, a Sunni-Shi'a thing between the two governments? I mean, why do you think the support will come after the turnover and why hasn't their been support up to now?

COL. CRAPAROTTA: I think, quite frankly, it's a matter of priorities.

And if you look at the provinces, the 18 provinces across the country, the priority is probably not as high in Al Anbar, based on the success we've had in the security situation here.

Therefore they've put some resources in other provinces that have been higher up on the priority list. But again I expect that some of that will change when we transfer to PIC.

MR. WHITMAN: Jeff, go ahead.

Q Colonel, Jeff with Stars and Stripes again.

Are your commanders still meeting with Awakening councils after Friday's incident, after the Karmah incident?

COL. CRAPAROTTA: Yes. My commanders, myself, all the commanders, I think, in the province and, I would surmise, all commanders in Iraq, in order to execute our job, we've got to be out there with the people, talking to the people, finding out what the issues are.

So we will still attend the councils. We'll make every attempt to prevent a breach in security. But our mission can't be accomplished unless we're out there working with the people, the sheikhs, the civic leaders and the local civilians.

- Q (Off mike.) Can you talk -- can you just say generally, are you taking any extra precautions?
- COL. CRAPAROTTA: I think we're taking the same precautions that we were taking prior to this incident. I can't guarantee 100 percent that we'll be successful. This is a dangerous business.

But in order to accomplish our mission, we have to be out there interacting with the local leaders. And we cannot avoid the danger completely if we want to have this continued success.

- Q Colonel, you were pretty optimistic in your opening statement about the Iraqi police. I'm just wondering, have they caught up in terms of training to the Iraqi army? And how would you assess their readiness? And what more needs to be done?
- COL. CRAPAROTTA: I think the police, certainly the police here in Fallujah and the police in Ramadi, are ready to take the lead.

I will give you an example. Yesterday, certainly, we sat down with the police and the army and talked about this incident in Karmah. And we decided there was a need to conduct an operation that has been -- was completed this morning. And the Fallujah District police chief, Colonel Faisal, when I asked him what he needed to execute the operation he told me that he would just as soon I watch my students go out there and execute and that he was confident he could do it, and if I was available to provide a QRF, that that would be enough.

- Q Colonel, it's Mike Mount again with CNN. Could you maybe go into a little bit about this operation? I know, narrowly -- you're limited on details. But was there anything that turned up that looks like maybe, you know, defeating future attacks or anything along those lines?
- COL. CRAPAROTTA: Well, I'm not sure. I know that they detained several folks. Certainly I don't know -- I don't even have a list of the names at this point. So I can't speak to what the detentions are going to provide to us as far as information.

I can tell you, though, that, you know, we focus on this event in Karmah, certainly a tragic event, but over the past two months, in May and June, there's been five other suicide-vest attacks. There was a vehicle-borne IED that went off in Fallujah. In all those talks, the effects of those attacks was minimized by the Iraqi police, by the Iraqi army and by the efforts of the coalition. And in several cases beyond those five and that one, attacks have been prevented completely. So while we focus on a single tragic event -- and certainly it was tragic -- I think we have to also understand how many of these events have been prevented and how many of these attacks have been thwarted before they could have the effect that the terrorists are looking for.

MR. WHITMAN: Go ahead, Jeff.

Q All right, Colonel, Jeff with Stars and Stripes again.

Are you aware of any plans to consolidate bases in your part of Anbar? For example, close smaller bases, move to bigger bases?

- COL. CRAPAROTTA: Yes, I am aware of -- (chuckles) -- in fact, we'll be moving our headquarters sometime here in the next six months in an effort to reduce presence here in Fallujah.
- Q Elaborate; exactly how many Marines and sailors are moving from where to where?
- COL. CRAPAROTTA: I'm not sure of all the details. I can speak to my headquarters. It's about 412 Marines and sailors in my headquarters will relocate out of Camp Fallujah.
 - Q Are you moving to Al Asad?

COL. CRAPAROTTA: No, we're moving to Camp Ramadi.

MR. WHITMAN: Luis?

Q Colonel, it's Luis Martinez with ABC News.

The Iraqi operation down in Basra required a shifting of forces within Iraq by the Iraqis themselves. How does that affect your situation or the security posture for your people inside Anbar province?

- COL. CRAPAROTTA: Well, initially, we had some concern, because again, we're at a point where the surge was over here in AO East, and we were relying heavily on the Iraqi army and the Iraqi police. And when we transitioned forces outside of Anbar, we really reduced the amount of Iraqi army available to me by two-thirds. But the Iraqi police have been able to get the job done. And I know I keep saying it, but I have complete confidence in the police force, and I think their record over the past four or five, six months certainly speaks for itself if you look at the security situation here in AO East.
- Q If I could follow up, sir. Have those Iraqi troops returned to Anbar? And do you think that there might be some correlation between some sort of spike of violence and their departure?
- COL. CRAPAROTTA: No, there's no correlation between their departure and a spike in violence and no, they have not returned to Anbar.
 - Q Can I just get a quick clarification?

MR. WHITMAN: Go ahead.

COL. CRAPAROTTA: Go ahead, yeah.

Q Colonel, Jeff with Stripes. Quick clarification, when you said your headquarters was moving, did you mean RCT-1 or the following Regimental Combat Team that comes in after you?

COL. CRAPAROTTA: RCT-1.

MR. WHITMAN: Luis, did you want -- (off mike) --

- Q Yeah, I was -- Colonel, it's Luis Martinez again. I was going to continue on this line of questioning. Sound like a prosecutor -- (chuckles) sorry about that. With the Iraqi forces no longer being -- with that brigade still remaining in Basra, how -- are you increasing patrols? I mean, you said that you were increasing reliance on the Iraqi police, but how does that affect your posture, in the sense that obviously they have different capabilities and different missions?
- COL. CRAPAROTTA: Well, without going into too much of what we're doing operationally, we are reducing some of our presence in the urban areas and relying more on the police there.
 - Q Thank you.

MR. WHITMAN: All right, Colonel, it looks like we've exhausted our questions from here on early on a Monday morning here in Washington. But before we bring it to a close, let me turn it back to you for any final thoughts that you might have.

COL. CRAPAROTTA: Okay, thank you. Yeah, I'd just maybe close by saying that I hope as the Fourth of July approaches that everybody's as proud of the service of the fighting men and women as I am. They continue to do a tremendous job over here under very difficult circumstances. And they've earned both the respect and the admiration of the Iraqi people here in eastern Anbar.

The cooperation with the State Department and the work of the Embedded Reconstruction Teams cannot go unrecognized here today. They've enabled success, and the accomplishments that we've made in governance, economics and reconstruction would not have been possible without them. And I expect that their role will increase in the coming months as we transition to provincial Iraqi control.

And then lastly -- and I've said it several times -- is our Iraqi partners. These are brave leaders, and they see a future for this province and this country, and they work every day with that future in mind. They're sheikhs; they're soldiers; they're policemen, mayors, city council members. Each of them has stepped up for the people and the future of this country.

And we know the fight's not over, but we're going to win the fight together, with the support of the Iraqi people. And success for us is simply providing these citizens with the greatest opportunity to enjoy a safe and a prosperous future here in al Anbar.

So thank you very much.

MR. WHITMAN: Okay, and Colonel, thank you from Washington. We appreciate your time and your perspective on operations in a vital part of Iraq. And we hope that we'll be able to do this with you again soon.

Thank you.

COL. CRAPAROTTA: Thank you.

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